

Dads*

As a kid growing up, my Dad took me everywhere. To his second job where he worked as a rate clerk in a truck terminal. I'd stay behind at his desk and watch as he went out to the yard and gave direction to the truck drivers. I remember that these men, hard men, hung on his every word. He shook their hands then came back inside, his hands full of grease.

Later, after he was promoted to a managerial position with a big office in a St. Louis high rise, he would take me to work on Saturday mornings. I'd watch as he greeted the janitorial staff by name, often bringing donuts for them to share, but only after taking two for himself and one for me.

We would often stop at Catholic church in a bad part of town and take a minute to pray with a group of nuns called the "pink sisters." Then we would stop by his mom's house for a lunch of her legendary mac & cheese... how he loved her! I was with him when we tried to install a window air conditioner in my other grandma's apartment and it fell out the window onto the sidewalk below and broke apart. He caught some hell that day.

That was my Dad.

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In my early twenties, I married Tom Murphy's daughter. He was an Irish cop, chief of detectives in St. Louis. He was about 6'3" with a mop of black hair, always with a cigarette. He was intimidating. He'd stop by my work in this beast of an unmarked police car, with his partner, and take me to lunch at some dive in a bad part of town. Patrons would stop eating and great him with "Murph!" He would often leave me at the counter to order while he and his partner talked to some character out back. He didn't need to order; the waitress just brought out his "usual."

As a young father, he would come over to my house and help me fix plumbing problems, once teaching me how to install a water heater by testing if the gas leaked with a cigarette lighter. He bought me tools, showed me how to put brakes on a car, and fix all sorts of home repair problems.

That was my first father-in-law.

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In my fifties, I married Sam Rothschild's daughter. He was in his 90's then, a mensch's mensch. Sam was of small stature, with grey hair and beard, but with one look you could tell he was man of substance. Smartest man I ever knew. One time he outlined the new Apple operating system to me on a bench outside a store as his daughter, my wife, was shopping. He explained to me how to manage money, where to invest, the perils of debt. He would ask his kid's, and me, "what have you done today to make the world a better place?"

At the independent living facility where he lived in a small apartment, other residents stood up when he entered the dining hall. His kids adored him, went to him for advice, called almost every day, visited often.

At his 100th birthday celebration I learned that when his family escaped Europe to avoid persecution, he was left behind with an eye infection only to later travel to the US by himself at thirteen. I found out that he was a WWII veteran, owned and ran businesses in crime-riddled areas to support his wife and six kids. He was smarter, and tougher, than the rest.

That was my second father-in law.

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Now I watch as my son, my stepsons, my son-in-laws, my brothers and my brother in-law raise my grandkids, my nieces and my nephews. Good dad's all.

They all do it differently, not necessarily as Art Hollenbach, Tom Murphy or Sam Rothschild would, and sometimes in ways that are mysterious to me. But all with the shared goal of bringing good people into the world. All leading by example, loving unconditionally and providing their children a path to be successful.

I want to close with a message to these Dad's still raising their children.

I understand that you sometimes wonder if you are doing the right thing. You second guess your decisions, believe that maybe you should have done or do things differently. You wonder if you are making any difference at all and if your kids are even paying attention. I know I did.

Well, looking back, I don't remember much of what my dad and my fathers-in-law taught me. Nor do I blame them for decisions they made in my behalf or well intentioned advice and direction that perhaps turned out to be wrong. What I do remember is how they carried themselves, how they treated others and how others treated them. How they loved me.

Take comfort in that. My guess is that is how your children will learn from you. How they remember you. Why they will love you. And from where I sit, in my old man perch, that's a good thing. This generation of Dad's are every bit as good, and probably better, than the Dad's that came before.

On this Father's Day, in a world gone crazy, you people bring me hope. Thank you.

Happy Father's Day!

That's all I'm sayin'

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*** My wife says this column is too "schmaltzy". It is also what Sam Rothschild would have said. She is her father's daughter.**